

What They Carried: An Archaeological Analysis of Artifacts Found At Fort Steuben

Sam Foresha

Marshall University Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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Abstract

The word “frontier” brings about certain connotations to the American public; they might think of Davy Crockett or of what came to be known as the “Indian Wars” as Americans pushed farther and farther west, conquering the vast land that lay just beyond the original colonies’ reach. What was a frontier fort like at the turn of the 19th Century? I will explore that question through the study of archaeological artifacts left behind in Fort Steuben. The fort, constructed in 1787, in what is now Steubenville, Ohio, was home to early American surveyors, soldiers, and civilians as they began their expansion towards the Mississippi and beyond. I have analyzed three artifacts found at the fort site during recent excavations: a clay pipe bowl, a musket flint, and a coin with King George III on the face. This paper will examine them, their history, and the importance of studying the frontier forts to learn just what life was like in those early days of “Manifest Destiny.”

Introduction

In this paper, I will explore the artifacts I have chosen to analyze from Fort Steuben and how they relate to the historical context of the site, as well as the cultural and social context of the people who lived and worked in the area. There is not much in terms of additional research for this form of archaeology—the field of battlefield or fort archaeology is underdeveloped and I hope that this work can help bolster some interest as well as show the importance of the study.

Theory

Just prior to and in the decades that followed the French and Indian war, the Ohio River Valley was a place of unknown wilderness. Despite the British, and later, the fledgling American governments attempting to keep people from straying too far from the safety of the original

thirteen colonies, people still ventured forth into the unknown. Some of the forts built along the Ohio River were remnants from the French and Indian war, others came later as more people expanded westward into the new territory. Fort Steuben, named for Baron Von Steuben, was built after the Revolutionary War in 1787. People were just settling into the area that would eventually be named Ohio, and the forts there were often places of refuge. However, little is known about the forts from an archaeological perspective—the “archaeological investigations have been limited” in research, excavation, and theory (Mcbride et. al, 2003). I hope with this research project, to shed some light on an otherwise unknown topic.

Methods

The three artifacts that I worked with were: the bowl of a clay pipe, a musket flint, and a 1775 British coin. Each item was recovered at Fort Steuben, in Steubenville, Ohio, by the dig team working with Franciscan University.

The clay pipe bowl is a recreational item, indicating that the soldiers staying at this fort likely had the time to make their pipes as well as smoke from them. A pipe could also be considered a comfort item taken with the soldiers travelling far from home to the new territory where they would be stationed. The musket flint was an important and necessary part of any soldier’s kit—without it, the gun could not fire at all. The importance of the flint and the pristine condition in which this flint is found may indicate that it was dropped. The coin was used for trade, most likely, despite being from approximately a decade before the fort was actually built.

The clay pipe bowl is approximately an inch deep, with a small, narrow opening at the top where the tobacco or other substance for smoking would be packed and lit. At the opposite end is where the stem of the pipe would be, and it is broken off here.

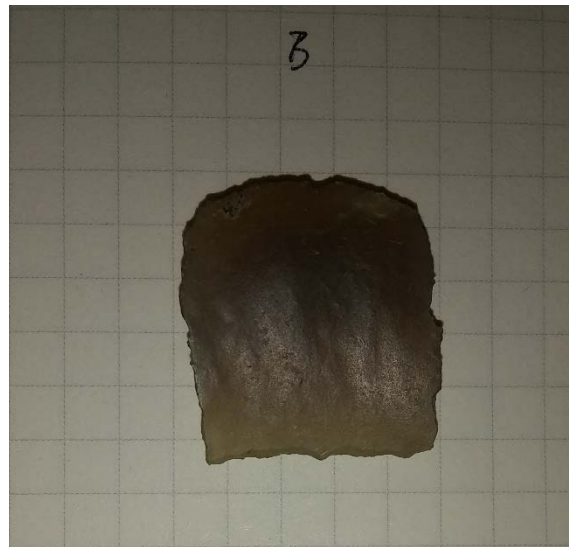
The musket flint is short and stout, amber in color, and slightly transparent at the narrowest end. The flint has been shaped to fit into the musket's hammer, the narrow edge filed down to make impact with the black powder that was used to prime and fire the weapon.

The coin is approximately the size of an American quarter, dark grey in color, with the etching of King George III, dressed in Greek or Roman regalia, with a crown of olive leaves. The words around the face of the coin read "GEORGIUS III REX," naming the king on the face of the coin in Latin.

Each artifact was recovered from the same site, with approximately the same estimated date. The coin was the latest discovery, and the most telling given the time period in which the coin had to be minted. Pre-1776, the colonies and thus those living on the frontier would have used British currency as their only currency. Post-1776, with the Declaration of Independence and the forming of the United States in the years that followed, newly-minted coins from Great Britain would not be common. However, the fort is dated to 1787, and burned down in 1790, putting the coin slightly at odds with the dates of the other objects. It is likely that the coin might have been dropped or forgotten, or even carried as a token.

Data

These images show the artifacts selected from the fort site. They were all photographed on centimeter grid paper. The coin has only a picture of the face, as the reverse side was heavily oxidized. All artifacts were taken from site n 33JC54, known as Historic Fort Steuben in Steubenville, Ohio.



Figures 1 and 2: The front face of the musket flint and the reverse face. Photo taken by author.

This gunflint was excavated on June 20, 1996. It comes from feature F123 on site 33JC54. A simple musket flint like this would have been used by any and all soldiers, civilians, or natives who had acquired or were given firearms—it is a standard and central piece to any firearm before the mid-1800s. The amber-brown color and slight transparency can be seen at the narrow end of the flint. This was the part that struck the black powder a firearm's pan, sparking the gun and firing the weapon. As small as it is, it was absolutely crucial to the people, regardless of race or loyalty, in the area at this time. Given that this is a fort site, it is important that these items are found to coincide with the historical documents and texts that indicate the fort was in use during this time.



Figures 3 and 4: The pipe bowl, front and back. Photo taken by author.

The pipe shown above is categorized as “Historical Clay Pipe Bowl” and was found as surface collection at the site. The pipe was likely made with local clay or brought with the soldier to the fort. I say soldier here, as this style of clay pipe is more associated with the European population that colonized the area. While native activity in the Ohio Valley was low after the Seven Years War, it is important to indicate the difference between the white people who were coming to the region and building forts and the natives who were leaving. This pipe shows a more recreational side to the people who inhabited and worked at Fort Steuben—they had downtime to sit by a fire or recline in their cots and smoke for a little while to unwind after a long day, much like we still do today.



Figure 5: The face of the coin of King George III, minted somewhere between 1770 and 1775. Photo by author.

This coin, minted by the British just before the outbreak of the American Revolution, was found in stratum F59 on the site. Despite being found buried, the coin itself is a bit of an anomaly; the fort was built in 1787, almost ten years after the Declaration of Independence was signed and four years after the 1783 Treaty of Paris that ended the war between the now United States and Great Britain. There are many reasons why a coin from a previous “era” might be found at later sites, from a veteran of the Revolution being re-stationed at a new fort, a father passing down a “lucky coin”, or even locals and native peoples doing business with fur traders to the north, in Canada, where British currency was still used. Given the looseness of the “looseness” and slightly chaotic way the country we live in today was originally organized, there are many theories and ways to explain the presence of the coin.

Analysis

This flint (fig. 1 and 2) is French in origin. The cut and color of the flint shows its origins in Europe; English flint was black or grey, while French flint was a brown-ish color or "blonde." The approximate date of this flint would be between 1770 and 1812, when the Americans switched to the English style of flint for their weapons. Flintlock firearms went out of style in 1838, with percussion firing, so the estimated date for these items would be very accurate (Hume, pp. 220, 221). The flint is more rounded, unlike the very boxy, rectangular cut favored by the English. The wear of the artifact shows it was used repeatedly in the firearm—it would have been fired or struck repeatedly. While most flints were used in weapons, some were used simply to strike a spark to either light a campfire or a tobacco pipe.

This clay pipe (fig. 3 and 4) dates from about 1790 to 1820. The style of the bowl and the lip indicate the American or "Virginian" style of tobacco pipe. Given that Fort Steuben was only across the river from what was, at the time, western Virginia, this style is to be expected here. Being made of clay, and handmade at that, this pipe was likely for a soldier or civilian of the working or lower class. There is no maker's stamp, as the stamp would be on the stem of the pipe--each pipe-maker had their own way of styling and crafting, so each pipe is unique and thus dating them without a maker's mark can be difficult. Even in the stylizations, there were trends that were standard in each era (Hume, p. 302). The angle and rounded lip of this pipe indicates a late 18th Century, early 19th Century date, which coincides with the fort's date.

The coin (fig. 5) is a British halfpenny from 1770-1775. It is likely a copper coin, as most of the coins of this low value had no gold or silver in them (Hume, 158). As for the reason the coin found its way into the fort, the original ideas I proposed could still stand. However, it is

more likely that the value of the coin was interchangeable with other currency. Much like finding a Canadian penny in your pocket change instead of an American one, it truly doesn't make a difference because a penny is a penny. Additionally, Hume suggests that the reason a British coin might be found on what was now "American" soil would be the incoming Irish or Scottish settlers; any immigrants from the British Isles would likely have British coins in their pockets. It also could have come from Canada with traders, as they were still a British colony and would have used the currency from the mother country.

Conclusions

In this work, I have analyzed the three artifacts from the Fort Steuben site. The musket flint, the pipe bowl, and the coin provided some, if not a lot, of insight on how the people of the era lived and worked. The musket flint related well with the military presence that would come with the fort, but it could have been part of many toolkits, as it was a truly multipurpose tool. The recreational nature implied by the pipe shows that the soldiers or civilians who lived in the area had time to relax and put their feet up, so to speak. The coin, given its unusual origins, ended up being more commonplace than I originally thought. While the field of fort archaeology is a burgeoning field, I hope that I have contributed in some way to its expansion.

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